

Independent Travelling in Iceland

A fact guide from www.trailzone.co.uk

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16th July 2002

Please visit the website for photographs and more information about Iceland in particular and travelling / hiking / climbing in general.



Where is Iceland?

Iceland sits to the North-West of Scotland by 495 miles - about as far past the Faroe Islands as the Faroe Islands are from Scotland. It lies near to Greenland and is just below the Arctic circle. It lies smack bang on the Mid-Atlantic rift - and is the only place where the ridge appears above the water surface. It's climate and environment is therefore strongly influenced by the Gulf Stream, the Arctic landmass of Greenland, and the turbulence of the tectonic activity along the ridge. To say that Iceland is a land of fire and ice is no misnomer.

What's the weather like?

Changeable. I have been to many places where the weather is erratic, but the saying "If you don't like the weather - just wait a bit" is never more true than here. The weather tends to literally change from hour to hour, as well as having severe localised effects such as icy wind blasts from the icecaps / windstorms / rain / sun and sandstorms in the interior.

When is it best to go?

It's really dependant on what you wish to do. If you just want to party and not leave civilisation then you could visit Reykjavik (the Capital) all year round. However, it would be a crime to miss what Iceland is really about - the wilderness and natural sites in the interior and on its edges. Because it tends to have long dark winters, it's really only appropriate to go from June to early September if you want to travel far. The snows may still block the inland roads even into this period.

How do I travel about?

Again it depends on your intention. It is perfectly possible to have a complete, cosseted travel package in Iceland with organised coach tours from the capital, or even from Akureyri in the North. Arctic Experience Ltd are a reputable company specialising in Iceland trips. See the Contacts information further down this page.

If however you are wanting a little more than the average tour, why not try hiring a mountain taxi (4 wheel drive company) or better yet - cycling. You can hike in Iceland, but it's actually a little boring compared to cycling as you can cover better distances on a bike. We averaged around 55 miles per day even on the interior Kjolur Track - maximum being 72 miles in a day.

How do I get there?

Until very recently, GO airlines did an excellent return package at around £160 each plus £20 for the bike. Now they are no longer around to service Iceland, so you only have one real choice; Icelandair. They are NOT cheap - around £300-£400 each.

You could go by ferry, via the faroes - but it takes much longer (upto a week as you have a 2 day stopover in the Faroes!). Air flight time is around 2-2.5 hours from Stansted, London.

The airport at Keflavik is about 30 miles from Reykjavik - and is a long boring cycle ride through a basaltic lava field!

I've heard it doesn't get dark - is that true?

In the "summer" - yes it's true. The picture on this page below shows how dark it is at midnight. It's just a dead light and you can watch the sunset and sunrise almost within about 30 minutes of each other - depending on where on Iceland you are. Effects are better in the North, and it's possible to see the Northern Lights if you're lucky - although this is only in the Winter unfortunately.

In the winter though it doesn't really get light! - and the approximately 250,000 Icelanders make the most of the summer months. In town it's pretty much always awake - particularly at weekends when even the children were playing at 4.00am!

Do they speak English?

Probably better than we do. Yes - all but probably the more remote and older residents speak English well. Icelandic is not a world language and even the cinema is in English - with Icelandic subtitles!

What are the Icelandic people like?

They are polite, friendly, hospitable and, in Reykjavik, very cosmopolitan. It rivals the likes of Paris and London, and they are very fashion conscious (not at all like me!). Far more Icelanders are employed in "service" industries than any other activity and tourism plays a massive part. Serious crime is very rare; car theft and petty crime rare - simply because there isn't anywhere to run to!

Reykjavik does have a reputation for being wild though. Icelandic youth tends to get pissed stupid prior to going out (because it's cheaper) and then hit the clubs. They drink what is the cheapest and rave hard.

Is Iceland expensive?

In short - yes - very! A sample list of costs below - taken from 2001 when we were last there.

- Can of Beer £4 - £6
- Car Hire £100 / day (approx)
- Bed and Breakfast £60+ per night - although you can find cheaper accommodation in farms and guesthouses.

Are there Youth Hostels in Iceland?

Yes there are - see the contacts section below

Can I stay in Mountain Huts?

These are big orange wooden huts in the remoter regions. However, they are NOT for general visitor use and for emergencies only. Do not plan on using them as your base.

Is it okay to travel through the more remote regions?

Travelling with a company that specialises in trips to the interior of Iceland; the western fjords or the highlands is very safe because they have the experience, equipment and expertise necessary.

If you plan to do it yourself, then you need to be self-sufficient and prepared to rough it. Suitable clothing for prolonged wet and cold weather is essential. See the equipment guide on the left as a basic guide for the independent traveller for Iceland's interior. Do not underestimate the danger of travelling in the interior - particularly if you take a route that involves river crossing.

What's it *actually* like to travel there?

Clare and I biked the Kjolur Track and some of the coastal road on mountain bikes in June last year (2001) - accompanied by Clare's brother Jon who'd been there several times before. Because of that it was relatively easy for Clare and I because Jon had told us what to expect. This is what it's like on a bike....

We arrived at Keflavik airport at 2.00am and after clearing customs emerged into the dim, dead light of the Iceland "night-time". It was then a very long and disheartening cycle ride to get to Reykjavik to find a campsite. We arrived at the campsite after many stops for a break at around 6:30am. It is near the stadium and was fairly busy. After setting up the tent we collapsed gratefully to sleep until about noon. We decided to explore Reykjavik by cycle and set off into the interior the following day.

Reykjavik is a superb place to cycle around and there is plenty to see. The weather was dull and overcast, the temperature with the wind was like a mild English spring - you still needed a jumper when you were still.

The following day we packed the tent and biked off towards "Thingvellir" to see the mid-Atlantic rift and the home of the original Icelandic parliament - the Althingi. Biking was relatively easy on metalled surfaced roads. The following day it pissed down with rain and we packed the tents

and pedalled off. By lunchtime and several mountainous roads later we had reached the sunshine and we spread our things to dry off. We hit Geysir by early afternoon and watched the Geysers before heading for Gullfoss - a spectacular waterfall (foss is waterfall) - then we decided to set off along the start of the Kjolur track.. At this point the road became gravelled and compressed basaltic dust. It was easy enough to cycle on a mountain bike and was quite fun. After about 10 miles we came to the foot of a fairly big mountain and spent ages pushing and cycling up and over it to arrive at a glacial river after a 72 mile day. Weary and plagued by midges we cooked tea, had a crap and fell into bed once more.

The following day we set off once more and after some polonged cycling had almost reached halfway (about 60 miles) when I went too fast over a particularly rocky seciton of the track and splayed my rear wheel rim so badly I thought it was a goner. I was about 3-4 days walk out at this point. After trying to ride it for a few miles it became obvious it wasn't going to survive. Amazingly I found a length of wood that would serve as a temporary workbench and Jon and I stripped the bike wheel down and hammered it out with a piece of lava. After removing the back brake sufficiently so it didn't catch (and also didn't work!) - we rebuilt it and set off. Clare had been shivering behind a boulder while we were busy and the wind was blowing strong gusts off the nearby glacier.

We made camp much later near another river - essential for water supply - and again had a good nights sleep. The following day was lovely and sunny and high-spirited we set off and by the end of another incredibly long day had made it to a small town (Vahmalid) where we could eat hot food - sheer lush! .Brilliant rainbow and wather effects here

We had done the Kjolur track. It's not technically difficult by any means, but it's the implications of a kit failure that make it challenging - and of course we had pedalled it under our own steam.

We didn't see many cyclists - the ones we did see were on organised trips with four wheel drive support vehicles. Also mountain buses passing with "cool" crowds of happening people taking the wussy option made us feel good too. Mostly you get four-wheel drives - and believe me you'll never see such hard cars - they are ace. Toyota Landcruisers by far and away make up for 80% or more of the standard vehicle - only they are modified with huge (and I mean HUGE) tyres - see the [Iceland Photos](#).

We then headed by bus for Akereuyri - where we camped in the town at a campsite teaming with people - and realised it was the weekend!. Nice town - usual Icelandic fishing dominated town. The following day we set off early and cycled around the coastline to head over the mountains into a headwind from hell. As any cyclist will tell you - hills are not a problem - the wind IS - if it's blowing at you. We spent ages cycling ultimately to reach Myvatn by late afternoon / early evening, passing Godafoss . A puncture slowed me up - but not for too long. Camping at a place with a shower was a luxury after such a gruelling day and we loved every minute of it.

The following day we rested (which meant a leisurely ride around the lake and some dossing about on the campsite reading a novel.)

The following day we had to think about heading back. We only had a few days left before flying back so we opted for the only available route open to us - the bus system around the south of the island. With bikes this is NOT cheap. We must have spent over £200 in bus fares for three people. The drivers are helpful though- especially with the bikes. They couldn't have been nicer.

We reached Skaftafell - a national park at the foot of the Vatnajokull icecap. A glacial tongue licks at it's flanks - Skaftafellsjokull . We spent a day there and hiked up into the mountains before enjoying a relaxing evening in the campsite. Superb place!

The following day we set off over the famous (or infamous) 30 or so mile stretch that is flat and devoid of life - but looks as though it was witness to some major geological event... and so it was. In around 1996 - the Hekla volcano erupted under the icecap and must have melted a lake of water the size of Derbyshire! - this built up pressure and then - like something out of the bible it burst forth at the foot of the icecap and for several days created a torrent of mud / water and icebergs the size of houses that tore the road and bridges out for about thirty miles!... awesome spectacle!

The last place of real note on the last section of the bus ride back to Reykjavik was the Glacial lake of Jokulsarlon - a lake created from the glacial meltwater and teeming with stranded icebergs that break from the main glacier. Take a trip around here in a second world war DUKW if you wish.

After reaching Reykjavik again and camping in the same campsite, we awoke and went Whale watching all day seeing minke whales - but nothing to write home about - that's whale watching for you - luck of the draw. On the last day we packed the tent for the last time ready to cycle back to Keflavik. This time we decided to go a circuitous route via the thermal areas of Krisavik and the town of Grindavik - a good route but longer and quite tiring. We reached the airport very gratefully with sore arses from cycling. Tip - get seamless cycling pants - do NOT wear normal pants or you will suffer bigtime - and take plenty of cream for chaffed skin.

Useful Links

Icelandair - Now the only airline servicing Iceland from Europe and the US - www.icelandair.net

Icelandair Hotels - Icelandair's own hotel chain - www.icehotel.is

Arctic Experience Ltd - Tour Operators - www.arctic-discover.co.uk - (Tel: 01737 218800)

Icelandair Holidays (US only) - Tel: 1800 779 2899

Icelandair Holidays (Canada) - Tel: 1800 779 2899

Iceland Tourist Board - Main Tourist Information in Iceland - www.arctic.is

Eimskip UK - Cargo Services from UK (any size) - www.eimskip.com - (Tel: 01469 550200)

P&O Scottish Ferries - Aberdeen based icelandic ferry service - www.smyril-line.fo (tel: 01224 572615)

Youth Hostels in Iceland - www.hostel.is or email: info@hostel.is - (Tel: +354 553 8110)

Farmhouse Accommodation - cheaper alternative - www.farmholidays.is

Whale Watching - if you've never done it - this is the place! - www.whalewatching.is or www.islandia.is/huni

Avis - Avis Rentacar - world renowned rental agency - www.avis.is

Icelandic Weather forecast (in English) - From Iceland - (Tel: 902-0600-44)

Great Britain Icelandic Embassy - www.iceland.org.uk or (Tel: London 020 7259 3999)

Mountain Taxi - Taxi with a huge ground clearance (see [Photo](#)) - www.mountain-taxi.com

Books:

"Iceland" - A Landmark Visitors Guide by Cathy Harlow - £12.95 (2001) **ISBN: 1-901522-68-7** - Excellent pocket guide. An absolute MUST have. Tel: 01335 347349 (UK) or email: landmark@clara.net

"Iceland" - An Insight Guide from APA Publications - £13.99 (2001) **ISBN: 962-421-422-0** - Very informativ and factual - with plenty of inspiring pictures. Email: insight@apaguide.demon.co.uk